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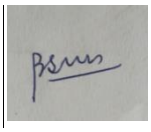
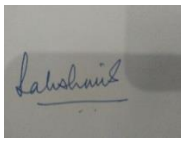
Signature of candidate	:	
Signature of research supervisor/Guide	:	

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The Geographical Imagination in Sri Lankan Fiction

1. Introduction (Theme, Rationale and Significance of Study):

The journey of Sri Lanka from "Paradise" to "Isle of Tears" has followed a violent trajectory, a trajectory that is underscored by the island nation's physical and cultural proximity to India. The post- independence struggles to preserve the fragile unity of the country was deeply embedded in the exclusionary, majoritarian, Sinhalese- Buddhist conception of the nation. The situation was exacerbated by the 'Sinhala Only' language policy and the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion, highly populist pronouncements that struck at the very root of the basic principles of a modern, liberal democratic nation-state: equality, justice and secularism. Denial of economic privileges and decline in educational and employment opportunities not only widened the schism between the majority Sinhala community and the minority Tamil community but also led to frequent tensions between them, beginning in sporadic clashes and ending in a fratricidal war with lakhs of casualties on both sides. The elimination of V. Prabhakaran and the complete rout of the LTTE in May 2009 may have brought the ethnic strife and civil war to an end but the scars are far from healed. The repressive state structures continue to trample upon the democratic rights and freedoms of the people of Sri Lanka.

How have Sri Lankan writers responded to these issues in this conflict-ridden geo-political space? This research is an attempt to find out the answers to the above question. For a long time, Sri Lankan literature in English remained in the shadows even as Indian literature in English became a trail-blazer on the international scene, especially in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Even when Sri Lankan literature in English began to gain prominence, it was the diasporic writers who first drew world-wide attention to their works. Contemporary Sri Lankan literature is 'a contested space' shaped by conflict, violence, questions of identity, ethnicity, authenticity and nationalistic and diasporic consciousness. It deals with terror, trauma, multiplicity of perspectives and the desire for peace and reconciliation in a society tired of the endless and mindless violence. It is clear that geography matters a lot in this contested context.

An emphasis on geography enables us to think about literature in ways that help us understand assumptions and stereotypes and explore new possibilities. Geography and literature both deal with lived experiences. If geography focuses on material spaces,

literature opens up 'imagined' spaces for the reader. A geographical approach to Sri Lankan literature adds a valuable dimension to the postcolonial and diasporic studies which have dominated literary analyses of works produced by writers of Sri Lankan origin. This is not to suggest, however, that spatial questions about nations and boundaries, regions and cultures, territories and identities have not been foregrounded before. This research attempts to use the geographical perspective to understand these issues in Sri Lankan context.

The writers who have been chosen for this research include Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Carl Muller, Nihal de Silva, Romesh Gunesekara, Ru Freeman, Nayomi Munaweera, Shehan Karunatilaka and Elmo Jayawardene. These writers in their own way deal with, mould, shape, reproduce, negotiate or contest a wide variety of social, political, cultural, literary and imagined spaces through their works as they attempt to make sense of the vexed politics of Sri Lankan nationhood and identity. Analysis of their works reveals that some texts deal with homecoming while others deal with leaving; in some, conflict is peripheral to the action, while in others, it is the pivot around which the entire conflict revolves; some act as a microcosm of the nation and reflect its fragility and vulnerability in the face of the challenges that threaten its very existence, while still others explore the tensions of marginalised positions.

This research work will attempt to explore the geographical imagination in Sri Lankan fiction against this backdrop.

2. Research Problem and Hypothesis Statement:

This research work seeks to understand the connections between geography and literature and its implications for Sri Lankan fiction. The aim of the study is to use the 'geographical imagination' as a means of reflecting on the importance of elements like space, place and landscape and their importance in conceptualising nation, identity, belonging, and difference in Sri Lankan literary narratives. The project will explore the intersections between geography, history and literature in the works of the selected Sri Lankan novelists.

The research undertakes the problem that the selected Sri Lankan novels use the 'geographical imagination' to creatively visualise space and place to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse in the Sri Lankan national space. The questions that the research will propose are:

i) What is the 'geographical imagination'? What are the general connections between geography and literature and the particular connections in the Sri Lankan context? How can the geographical imagination help us understand the various ways in which space is rendered, understood and imagined into existence in Sri Lanka?
ii) How do the diasporic writers visualise Sri Lankan space? Do diasporic interventions adequately reproduce Sri Lankan political, social and spatial reality?
iii) What are the implications of space for gender relations in these works? How do gender roles and relations manifest spatially?
iv) Are there possibilities in the geographical imagination of these works that go beyond the binary, oppositional conception of space in Sri Lanka? Are there articulations of alternate spaces?

3. Research Area and Objectives:

There has been a proliferation of literary studies exploring different aspects of South Asian literature including postcolonial and diasporic studies. They have focused mainly on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, there has been a dearth of critical studies of literature produced by Sri Lankan writers. Even when Sri Lankan writers have been the subject of study, the emphasis has been on postcoloniality, diaspora and history. Hence, the main objective of the proposed research is to focus on select Sri Lankan novelists and reinterpret their works through the concept of the geographical imagination. The focus on literary geographies will offer a new dimension to the interpretation of the texts. It will also allow an interrogation of the claims of the postcolonial Sri Lankan nation-state.

4. Operational definition of terms and concepts:

The terms expected to be used in the research study will include literary geography, geographical imagination, imaginative geography, thirdspace, topology, space and spatiality, landscape, mapping, postcolonialism, memory and diaspora.

5. Literature Review:

Literature has been an area of relevant interest to geographers, especially for the manner in which landscape, places, regions, nations, and processes like urbanization, colonization and globalization have been represented in literature. Literary geography emerged as an important sub-field within human geography in the nineteen seventies. Till the nineties, literary geography contented itself with questions regarding descriptions of places, landscapes and representations of areas/regions in literature. It is only in the last decade of the twentieth century that the focus shifted to the importance of space and place in the literary narrative.

The emphasis on space, place and landscape as important elements in the study of literature has often been referred to as "the spatial turn in humanities". It is an area that has been growing in relevance since the beginning of the millennium and has vastly expanded the scope of literary studies. It emerges at the intersections of history, geography and social theory. Spatial theory refers to the study of space and place; it is a wide area that refers to geography, material objects, the environment, social institutions, ideology and the imagination among others. It thinks about space in ways that are different from earlier conceptions of space. Every literary creation, the novel in particular, has a particular space setting that is no longer viewed as a mere backdrop for the action to unfold but as a site of discussion, debate, struggle and engagement with ideas and beliefs, principles and values. Thus, space is not seen as merely physical setting but as being intertwined with lived experiences.

The term 'geographical imagination' was first coined by Hugh Prince (1962) as he pointed out the inherent contradiction in combining two diverse, challenging disciplines: geography and literature. About a decade later, David Harvey too provided a scholarly description of the term; however, unlike Prince's emphasis on landscape and nature, Harvey recognised the value of space and place.

Henri Lefebvre's path-breaking book *The Production of Space* (1974) opened up new areas of discussion regarding the study of space. Lefebvre challenged the idea of space as abstract and passive and proposed a theory that brought together the physical, social and mental dimensions of space. He suggests a 'trialectics of space' where space is perceived, conceived and lived.

Edward Soja draws attention to the contingent nature of space and place through his concept of "Third space", a dimension he adds to the traditional historical and social modes of interpreting life and literature. It helps him to eschew binary oppositions and offer an alternative mode of perceiving the world. Edward Said and Benedict Anderson see space as important tool in the construction of cultural imaginaries. Homi Bhabha uses 'hybridity' as an in-between, third space to articulate the fluid nature of identities.

Doreen Massey expounds the notion of a progressive sense of place. For her, place is a location of myriad spatialities from the body to the global. It is also the result of particular arrangements of power. Gillian Rose too draws on the French feminists like Cixous and Irigary and their work on binaries to show how women are under-represented in history, geography and culture. Instead of viewing space in binary terms such as inside/outside, centre/margin, she sees possibilities of occupying both places simultaneously suggesting a fluidity of approach that Soja also proposes.

Works by K.M. De Silva, Nira Wickramasinghe, A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, Nihal Perera, Tariq Jazeel, D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Chelva Kanakanayagam, Minoli Salgado and Maryse Jayasuriya will be used for understanding various aspects of Sri Lankan history, geography and literature.

Since most of the writers have been published recently, there is hardly any critical material available. Much research has been done on Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai and Romesh Gunesekara, but we do not find enough material from the geo-spatial perspective. Tariq Jazeel's essay "Geography, Spatial Politics and Productions of the National in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" will be useful as a starting point in understanding the connections between real and imagined spaces in their novels.

Drawing on the above theorists, this research seeks to understand how the temporality of history is mediated by the spatiality of geography and the implications of this mediation for an understanding of Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction.

6. Research Design:

The research will use the qualitative research methodology and the spatial and postcolonial perspective in its examination of selected texts. It will depend mainly on analytical and interpretative methods. Historical, geographical and political texts will be relied upon for a better understanding of the Sri Lanka's contentious history and the current state of affairs.

The primary sources will be the selected works of Sri Lankan writers like Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Carl Muller, Nihal de Silva, Romesh Gunesekara, Ru Freeman, Nayomi Munaweera, Shehan Karunatilaka and Elmo Jayawardene. Secondary sources will include other fictional, non-fictional, theoretical works, reviews, interviews and other relevant sources. Wherever possible, attempts will be made to talk to experts in the field to get them to share their opinions on the literature being produced in the island nation as well as on the socio-political situation in the country. Data resources will include library as well as online resource. The libraries at Kishinchand Chellaram College, SIES College, the University of Mumbai Library, Asiatic Library, etc will be visited for data collection. Online resources like JSTOR and other relevant online journals will also be accessed.

7. Scope and Limitations/Delimitations of Study:

The production of literature in Sri Lanka is diverse consisting not only of fiction, poetry, drama and short stories but also in multiple languages – English, Sinhala and Tamil. This project, however, will focus on the Sri Lankan novel in English as the novel is one of the most appropriate forms for considering the connections between the geographical imagination and literature. Even within the genre of the novel, this research work does not attempt to construct a literary history or undertake exhaustive literary analysis of the novels produced in Sri Lanka. Rather, it selects specific authors and texts that lend themselves to a geographical and spatial analysis.

The research aims at studying Sri Lankan fiction from the geographical and postcolonial perspective. This is not to suggest that these texts cannot be interpreted from other critical perspectives. This selection aims at providing a comprehensive and representative picture of the use of the geographical imagination in Sri Lankan fiction in English. The texts under consideration would be those produced between 1990 and 2015. However, texts published outside this period may be used for comparative, cross-reference and other purposes.

8. Tentative Scheme of Chapterisation:

The following is the scheme of chapterisation visualized by the researcher for her study:

Chapter I: The Geographical Imagination and Sri Lankan Fiction

This introductory chapter will contextualise the research argument by providing operational definitions of some key terms like 'geographical imagination' and 'third space' among others. The chapter will also provide a brief history of Sri Lanka and the emergence and development of the Sri Lankan novel in English. The chapter will also provide an introduction to the various writers being discussed in the thesis.

Chapter II: The Nation and Diasporic Imagination

This chapter will focus on the works of diasporic writers to explore the connections between memory, representation, invention and nation, identity, power and authority. It will also critically examine whether diasporic interventions adequately reproduce Sri Lankan political, social and spatial reality and whether diasporic voices reproduce unequal power relations as a result of their location.

Chapter III: Spatial Manifestations of Gender

This chapter will examine the ways in which sexuality is connected to the social and spatial order. It will explore spatial manifestations of gender in the selected works and examine whether the patriarchal character of space is reinforced or challenged, resisted or negotiated.

Chapter IV: Alternative Imaginations in Sri Lankan Fiction

This chapter will focus on imaginative possibilities that go beyond the binary, oppositional conception of space in Sri Lanka to open up a third space or reflect multiple conceptions of space. It will also try to examine the different articulations of space that makes possible alternate reimaginings of the nation, reconstructions of identities and representations of social reality.

Chapter V: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, the researcher will attempt to delineate the findings of the study based on the above chapters. The chapter will also go back to the main hypothesis of the

study to find out how far it has been validated by the research carried out by the researcher.

9. Comparative Study:

Comparative study is not the main focus of this research but comparative analysis will be undertaken in a limited way wherever relevant to the research.

10. Justification of the Study (Expected Results and Policy Implications):

Resources for the study of Sri Lankan literature are fewer in availability compared to those available for the study of literature from other South Asian countries like India or Pakistan. This research will add to the existing resources available for the study of Sri Lankan writing in English. Secondly, the interconnections between geography and literature will open up alternate, new and diverse ways of reading literature. This will be in keeping with the current focus on interdisciplinary research in literature. This research will also be useful to scholars interested in probing the intersections of geography and postcolonial studies. Thirdly, the research will offer useful insights into literature emerging from violent and conflict-ridden spaces. Literary responses to the violence, terror and trauma can help in dialogue and reconciliation, and in healing strife-ridden societies. Finally, the research will make room for Sri Lankan writers who have hitherto remained relatively unknown to share space with their famed diasporic counterparts.

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